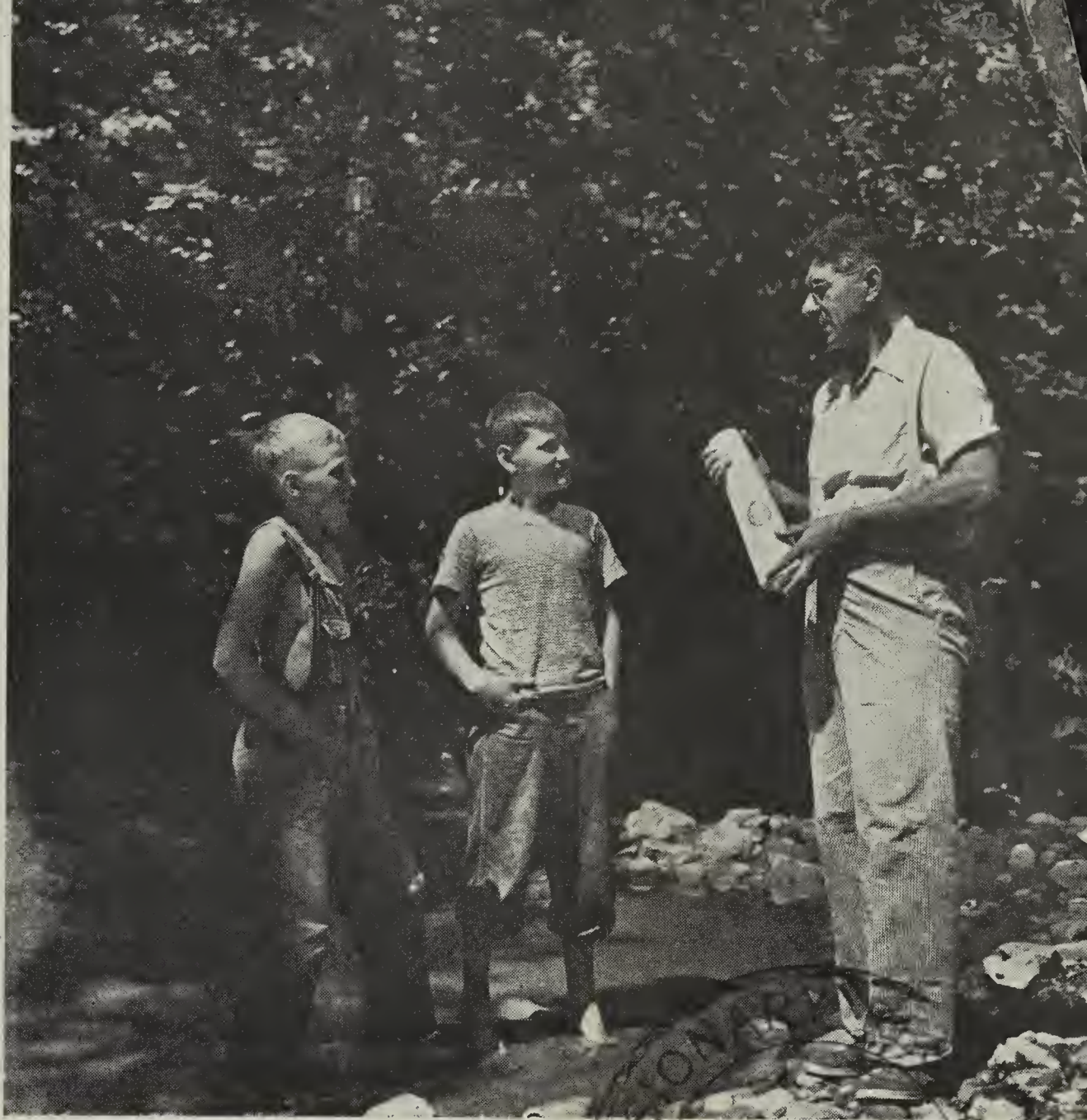


# KENTUCKY'S MOUNTAIN PREACHER

By WEBB B. GARRISON

**Breathitt County people spent more time feuding than farming until Sam Vander Meer became pastor at the Morris Fork Church.**



Sam chats with boys wading in creek that is only road to Morris Fork.

**O**LD-TIMERS in the Kentucky mountains still hesitate to answer questions about Breathitt County. They remember only too well the days when strangers were likely to be "law men" from outside, snooping around trying to get evidence on a suspected killer.

Small wonder that, even in outlaw country, men regarded the county as in a class by itself and spoke of it as "Bloody Breathitt." Whisky, politics, and women accounted for a killing or so every time the moon changed.

One murder frequently touched off a chain of deaths, as vengeful survivors set out to get their own brand of justice. During a memorable ten-month period in 1901-1902, thirty-seven murders were committed in the county. More than once, the governor was forced to call out the militia to halt a wave of death.

Natives of Bloody Breathitt were accustomed to take this carnage quite for granted. Except for an occasional brush with a revenue agent foolhardy enough to risk his life in the area, the mountain people had no escape valve other than

their private feuds.

There was no industry, little business, and a very poor type of farming. People were accustomed to living on a diet of pork and corn bread, seldom saw a dollar in cash. Houses were old and dilapidated, often without windows. Sanitary facilities consisted of open-pit privies. Whole communities were infected with trachoma and hookworm, the latter of which the old folks described as "misery in the stum-mick." Few in the entire section had ever seen a screened window, running water, or an electric light.

That was Breathitt County, U. S. A., in the Year of Our Lord 1923.

Early that summer, an immigrant boy from The Netherlands went to the Kentucky mountains for a summer vacation. Already dedicated to religious service, Samuel Vander Meer felt that he could do very little because of his limited education. At thirteen, he had begged to be permitted to go to high school, but his father thought it more important for him to go to work and help support his nine brothers and sisters. In 1923, he had com-

pleted a missionary training course at the National Bible Institute, New York, but was not an ordained minister.

So Sam was looking for a spot where his educational limitations would not prevent him from serving God and humanity. That summer, he spent the weekdays hoeing corn on the steep mountain side and the Sundays visiting nearby churches.

Living on the campus of Witherspoon College, Buckhorn, Kentucky, Vander Meer was asked to fill a temporary vacancy in the local public school. Though not a trained teacher, he agreed. On Sundays, he continued his religious work.

Just as he was making plans to return to his New Jersey home, he was approached by a deputation from isolated Morris Fork community. They had been without a teacher for several years; as a matter of fact, the schoolhouse was about to fall down from neglect. Hearing of the young Yankee teacher, they 'lowed as how they'd like to have him come and open the school. No one familiar with the reputation of the community would have considered such an offer. In native par-

LIBRARY

Vander Meer





Every Sunday about 135 people come to the Morris Fork Church.

Mrs. Vander Meer tends rustic house when she isn't nursing neighbors.

lance, there was too much danger of contracting a sudden case of lead poisoning.

Vander Meer prayed over the matter, then accepted the strange invitation. Since he was not qualified to receive pay from the county, he agreed to serve in return for his board and lodging.

His heart sank when he caught the first glimpse of his schoolhouse—a shanty that had been condemned for thirteen years. But he stuffed rags in the cracks, secured a donation of lime, and gave the building a coat of whitewash.

Although he didn't realize it for awhile, Vander Meer had found his place. In Breathitt County, a university degree might have been little help, but Vander Meer had exactly the qualities called for. A tall, dark, athletic young man, he could ride a horse, drive a team, plow a straight furrow, or build a house with his own hands.

Some home gardeners boast of having a green thumb, but Vander Meer possessed this magic in all ten fingers. His wizard's touch with growing things might have made him a name in horticulture, or in the expanding science of farming. Instead, he was to spend his life improving

the tired, ill-used soil of Breathitt County.

When Vander Meer's school opened in November, thirty pupils came. They were of all ages, and included sullen youngsters of ten and twelve who had never been to school a day. Parents of the children arranged to board the young schoolmaster, but none of them would keep him for more than a single night at a time. So he arranged a schedule, rotating among his patrons once each month. Sometimes there were thirteen in the family, all sleeping in two or three beds in a single room.

Sam received no special privileges, was treated "just like a member of the family." But he did insist upon having devotions with his hosts each evening as they sat before the open fire. Soon he began holding religious services in the schoolhouse. No one responded to his invitations to accept Christ, but they did attend the services.

Economic problems multiplied, and after four months Vander Meer felt that he could stay no longer. He preached a farewell sermon in the schoolhouse—and on that day, twenty-one persons came forward to accept Christ as Savior. Tears in his eyes, Sam tried to say goodbye.

"We hain't a-sayin' goodbye," a grizzled grandfather announced. "You can go, but you'll be back. We're a-gonna pray ye back."

And pray him back they did, within a few months. He re-opened the school, and this time had more pupils than he could accommodate. Another community across the mountains asked for help, so he began teaching there two days a week.

Then the old folks began wanting to learn to read and write. So many adult classes were organized that Vander Meer had to meet a different group each night in the week. On Sundays, he preached in three communities. Since Breathitt County had no modern roads, all travel was on foot or mule-back.

Youngsters responded to both school and church more rapidly than did their elders. Some life-long moonshiners never quite lost their suspicion of the outsider. One old chap from a neighboring ridge was frankly incredulous when, in 1926, work was started on a community house. He stalked down out of the mountains, his rifle in the crook of his arm, and demanded to be told who was building the big new "still box."



### *Social gatherings*

But even the skeptics were impressed by the first social gatherings in the new community house in 1927. Word of this, and other progress at Morris Fork, led the Forest Hill Presbyterian Church of Newark, New Jersey, to offer to provide financial support for Vander Meer. This same year, Vander Meer was ordained in the Presbytery of Buckhorn.

Bolstered by the new security of a cash income, the mountain preacher married Nola Pease, public health nurse in nearby Leslie County. Hardly was she established in her new home before Mrs. Vander Meer began planning for a program of clinical work.

She secured funds from the state board of health. She persuaded the railroad to give free rides to patients going to city hospitals. Baby clinics, vaccinations, inoculations, and sanitary toilets became a part of the established program of Morris Fork Church.

Recognizing the connection between economic and spiritual ill-health, Vander Meer sponsored projects in scientific farming. Under the auspices of the minister, state and federal agencies began to penetrate the region.

Formerly, it was customary to reserve a piece of land for pasture, devote perhaps a quarter of an acre to a garden, and plant the remainder in corn. Year after year, the same pattern had been followed, and year by year the yield had diminished. It took months to persuade an appreciable number of men to begin practicing crop rotation, but after that, agricultural progress was faster.

Meanwhile, worship services were held in the community house until a church could be built. Gifts of lumber, money, and labor—almost every man in the community helped—made it possible to erect a church, in 1929, of native stone, logs, and shingles. After her first visit to the church, a mountain woman returned home and reported to her family, "It minded me so much of the place my Savior was borned in, I might' nigh cried."

### *Community transformed*

As the years passed, the whole life of Morris Fork was transformed by the program that centered in the church. Women began to talk about balanced diet, cold-pack canning, and wilt-resistant tomatoes. Men began bringing in pure-blooded poultry and stock, planting soy beans and legumes. Paint appeared on a few houses, many windows were screened, and sanitary toilets were introduced. A modern school building was erected, and departments of domestic science and manual training were established.



Store and farm make up Crocketsville, town nearest to Morris Fork.



Bible story is told to Sunday school attended by the old and young.





Sam Vander Meer welcomes Riley Kelly and family to Sunday school. Riley's team of mules takes him where a car could not.

Visitors going through Morris Fork community today would hardly recognize it as having been one of the most backward areas of bloody Breathitt County. Nearly 200 persons are numbered on the membership roll of the church. Boys and girls look forward to Vacation Bible School as eagerly as their parents used to anticipate shooting a member of a rival clan. The Sunday school is graded and modern in every respect, as are the junior and senior youth groups. The white-robed choir would do justice to any church.

Samuel Vander Meer has had gratifying recognition for his work. He has been a prominent leader in 4-H Club work, state president of the Christian Endeavor Union, stated clerk of Buckhorn Presbytery, moderator of Buckhorn Presbytery, and moderator of the Synod of Kentucky. In 1949, he was named Rural Minister of the Year for the State of Kentucky.

But he declares that his greatest tribute came from an official in his own church. One Sunday he announced that the Conference of Southern Mountain Workers

was offering the services of a trained recreational leader for two weeks. "Does the church want him?" inquired the minister.

"Well," declared an elder, "we've had all kinds of programs since you came to Morris Fork, but this is the first time I ever heard of a program just for play. You're doing a heap of queer things we don't understand, but we know you're working for the good interests of us and our children. So go ahead and lead us, and we'll try to follow!"

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